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United States Board on
Geographic Names



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1890-1990: A CENTURY OF SERVICE

United States Board on
Geographic Names

Meredith F. Burrill
Executive Secretary Emeritus
U.S. Board on Geographic Names



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As it observes its 100th anniversary, the United States Board on Geographic Names can take great pride in the service it has rendered. Its accomplishments are remarkable, for despite organizational and mission changes over the years—including abolishment on several occasions followed by immediate reestablishment—it has led the way in resolving geographic name problems at home and, in cooperation with others, abroad. Its rulings and recommendations have been accepted on their merits alone, since there is no penalty for noncompliance. The Board’s authority extends only to the United States Government, but its benefits extend to the American public and the rest of the world.

Geographic names are phenomena of language applied to phenomena of geography. They are indispensable to communication. They identify individual hills, rivers, towns, and other such entities and facilitate reference to them, as personal names do for people. Obviously, the more distinctive the name the better it will do this. Ideally, there should be but one invariable name for a given entity and only one entity by that name.

In practice, the extent to which complete distinctiveness is approachable varies with such things as the times, mobility of people, naming habits, language flexibility, and political will to agree. Confusion often arises if the same thing has different names or if the same name is applied to different things. As more and more people at greater and greater distances from a given geographic entity have occasion to refer to it, the probability of such confusion rises sharply.

One hundred years ago the trouble caused by geographic names confusion in Government publications became so serious, particularly in the case of Native American names in Alaska, that a handful of Federal administrators decided that corrective measures were needed. An informal committee of representatives of the Coast and Geodetic Survey, the Hydrographic Office, the Army Engineer Corps, the Geological Survey, the Light House Board, and the Smithsonian Institution met on March 18, 1890, and called itself the United States Board on Geographical Names. After a series of discussions concerning principles and some months of trying to induce voluntary conformity with its findings, the group concluded that Government agencies would not change their ways and would not use standard names unless told to do so.

Standardization of Geographic Names

Creation of Board on Geographic Names

The situation was called to the attention of President Benjamin Harrison, who issued an Executive Order on September 4, 1890, establishing a Board on Geographic Names (BGN) and providing that “to this Board shall be referred all unsettled questions concerning geographic names which arise in the Departments, and the decisions of the Board are to be accepted by these Departments as the standard authority in such matters.”

Official standardization of geographic names in the United States had begun. The accomplishments of this Board and its successors during the past century reflect the ability, integrity, courage, and devotion of men and women in the Federal service. More than 400 have served without compensation as Board members, deputy Board members, or members of advisory committees or groups. Hundreds more have participated in staff work—not to mention those individuals in other countries who have contributed to the endeavor.

Link to Mapping and Charting

Progress in geographic names standardization has been inextricably tied to progress in mapping and charting. The initiative for the original Board came from agencies producing navigational charts. Major changes in mapping have called for and facilitated parallel changes in name standardization. Maps are indispensable both as sources of information to name standardizers and as vehicles for making the standardized names available to users. International cooperation in mapping has inevitably pointed to the need for standardized naming.

Funding for the Board has always been cause for concern but has not precluded progress. For much of this century, mapping agencies have been principal supporters of the Board's activity. This has tended to focus effort on large programs of immediate concern, but the Board's sense of long-range mission has grown with the times.

International Efforts

The United States has not been alone in the name standardization effort. The first International Geographical Congress, held in Amsterdam in 1871, discussed the subject and agreed that for maximum comprehension, roman-alphabet forms should be adopted for nonroman-alphabet languages. It also sought unsuccessfully a way of writing that would elicit universally correct pronunciation. Successive geographical congresses took up the problem and several alphabets were devised, but none was agreed upon. A suggestion that consonants be written as in English and vowels as in Italian was adopted by the Royal Geographical Society in Britain. A revision to this policy, RGS II, was adopted by the BGN in 1933 and served for a decade. Complications of developing precise pronunciation rules have led the Board to avoid any pronunciation policy.

Other bodies involved with efforts to standardize names include the Universal Postal Union, the International Hydrographic Office, the International Organization for Standardization, the International Cartographic Association, the International Astronomical Union, the International Union of Geodesy and Geophysics, the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research of the International Council of Scientific Unions, the American Name Society, the Association of American Geographers, and the American Geographical Society. These organizations have provided information to the Board and have adopted Board procedures or relied on its decisions.

Six Periods Describe History

Geographic name standardization by the Federal Government has been marked by six principal periods beginning, respectively, in 1890, 1927, 1934, 1943, 1947, and 1958. In the first 37 years—1890-1926—the successive boards were independent and had no staff. In the next 7-year period—1927-1933—the Board was still independent and had a staff of one to three persons. In 1934 the independent Board was abolished in a general reorganization of the executive branch that placed most small independent agencies under the supervision of major departments. The name standardization function was assigned to the Department of the Interior, and the former Board was promptly reconstituted as an Advisory Committee and its staff of one to three persons became a division in the Department of the Interior. The title "U.S. Board on Geographical Names" was assigned to this newly formed group. In 1943, the staff was greatly enlarged to meet wartime demands and the Advisory Committee was reactivated, beginning a short but significant period of 4 years.

The fifth period began with the Statutory Authority Act of July 25, 1947, creating the present United States Board on Geographic Names to act conjointly with the Secretary of the Interior. The sixth period started with the split of the Board's staff into domestic and foreign name units in 1958.

The First Period—1890-1926

In the first period, which began in 1890, the general framework of name policy was laid down and tested. A few foreign names were evaluated from the very first, and some country names were systematically processed. In 1906, the Board's title was changed to United States Geographic Board, and the function of coordinating Federal mapping was assigned to it by Executive Order. Before that responsibility was reassigned to a new Board of Surveys and Maps, the first set of standard symbols for topographic maps had been developed. In 1916, a committee of the Board urged the adoption of a more aggressive program to standardize names before they caused serious confusion rather than afterward. Cumulative lists of standardized names were published in 1892, 1901, 1906, 1916, and 1922.

The Second Period—1927-33

In the second period, which began in 1927, the pace was accelerated by active committees and a paid staff. The "First Report on Foreign Names," containing some 2,500 names, included the more important names from each country and some of the post-World War I changes. It was published in 1932. Large lists of names in Hawaii and the Philippines were made official. A cumulative report, published in 1933, contained about 25,000 names; most were domestic, but a number of foreign names were included.

The Third Period—1934-42

During the third period, which started in 1934 with the transfer of the function to the Department of the Interior, the range of interest and activity was progressively narrowed, and practically no foreign names were standardized. An Executive Committee of three gradually took over the functions of the original Committee, which did not meet from 1941 to 1944. Three or four hundred domestic names were decided on each year and were published at year's end, but the Board was quite unprepared for the increased activity brought about by World War II.

The Fourth Period—1943-46

The fourth period began in 1943 when, at the request of some 15 Federal agencies and with ample working funds, the Department of the Interior quickly organized and assembled a large staff of professional geographers, linguists, and native speakers of Asian languages and began mass processing of names to meet wartime needs. Indexes of names on the maps used in the invasion of Europe were prepared on short notice and filled a real need. Some 3 million Chinese, Japanese, and Korean names were transcribed systematically into roman letters, most of them for the first time. This was the beginning of mass processing and of massive files.

"Guides" to the geographic names of China, Japan, and Korea were prepared, which included transcription systems, general rules, analysis of sources, tables showing Chinese characters and corresponding syllabic characters, and romanizations. These tools were useful to a wide range of people in and out of Government. For many roman-alphabet countries, "Directions" citing the pertinent Board-approved policies and evaluating the source material provided some help. However, the "Directions" did not produce enough uniformity in names, and after the war, as new material rapidly made them obsolete and as files became more manageable, the "Directions" were dropped. The new material also revealed the deficiencies in pre-war and wartime information. Accordingly, in many parts of the world it was necessary to start afresh. Intelligence studies quickly made it obvious that individual name standardization in volume was indispensable and the Board's help was sought and given.

For many years all materials produced by intelligence agencies were edited for name consistency and conformity. However, as the files grew and gazetteers made it easier to obtain the correct names in the compilation stage, the editing program that had dealt with more than a half million names a year was largely phased out. The gazetteers of official standard names were security-classified for a few years but later were made available to the public. Individual names were always publicly available. All areas of the world are covered by BGN gazetteers, most of which have been enlarged and

brought up to date several times. The gazetteer program demonstrated that it was more useful and cheaper to standardize names before mixups occurred than to unravel confusion. Also, in this wartime period and immediately thereafter, domestic name standardization was greatly increased and record systems were established.

The Fifth Period—1947-57

The fifth period began July 25, 1947, with the enactment of legislation authorizing geographic name standardization and creating the present Board on Geographic Names to function conjointly with the Secretary of the Interior. The original membership of the full Board included representatives of the Departments of State, War, Navy, Post Office, Interior, Agriculture, and Commerce; the Government Printing Office; and the Library of Congress. Later the Central Intelligence Agency was added, and military interests were jointly represented by the Department of Defense. Members were appointed, and the first meeting was held September 15, 1947. The volume of foreign names processed each year since 1947 has made it impractical for the Board's Committee on Foreign Names to examine each name individually before approval. Instead, Committee approval has been sought first for policies and for individual names that raise policy questions, illustrate policy problems, or involve changes in names previously acted upon individually. Files of names, by country or area, are then approved en masse as official standard names. This procedure had also been followed in standardizing names for Alaska and Hawaii many years earlier.

Because of the weight assigned to local usage in the case of names processed by the Domestic Names Committee, a "docket list" procedure was developed. A brief was prepared for each name and a recommendation made. Recommended names, with identifying descriptions, were then compiled in docket lists for Board consideration. The names on this docket would not be considered until 30 days after its release. The lists were circulated to the Board members and also were given to the press wire services with an invitation for comment. Any names questioned then were considered individually; the others were approved as recommended. More than 9,000 domestic names were approved in fiscal year 1949.

During the 1950's, a systematic examination of terms used in all geographic names on the topographic maps of the United States, and the subsequent mapping of their distribution, provided many surprises. For example, most of the named "summits" were found to have higher land on either side and many were in the bottom of deep valleys. People had named them "summits" simply because they were the high points on railway and highway grades. In staff discussions to select terms to identify the kind of entity a name referred to, staff members sometimes differed and passionately defended their views of the appropriateness of terms.

Incontrovertible evidence was provided that the variety of terms and the variety of connotations of terms used in names was far greater than had been suspected. Many clues were uncovered leading to better understanding of the evolution of both names and terms and how to identify named things so that communication about them would not be distorted.

The Sixth Period—1958-90

In 1958, after domestic name standardization had been greatly reduced by lack of funds, the U.S. Geological Survey took over the staff work, recordkeeping, and publication of decisions on domestic names. The part of the staff work dealing with foreign names was transferred in 1968 to the Department of Defense. Since then staff support has been divided between the U.S. Geological Survey and the Defense Mapping Agency. The Domestic Names Committee and the Foreign Names Committee take final action on names that are in accord with approved policy. Each has an executive secretary, one of whom serves as executive secretary for the full Board; from 1958 to 1990 two executive secretaries of the Foreign Names Committee have been successively the executive secretary of the Board. The full Board continues to act,

conjointly with the Secretary of the Interior, on policy, governance, and names processed by special or advisory committees.

Active Advisory Committees

Advisory committees and consultative bodies have been active throughout the Board's existence. In total, they have had thousands of meetings. One on Alaska was set up shortly after the Board's founding and produced the first edition of the "Geographic Dictionary of Alaska" in 1901. Subsequent editions have revised and enlarged it. The 1966 edition, titled "Dictionary of Alaska Place Names," contains some 44,000 entries. A Philippine Committee on Geographic Names, set up by the Civil Governor, William Howard Taft, in 1903, processed some 3,000 names. An advisory committee appointed by the Governor of Hawaii in 1912 had acted on 900 names by 1933.

In 1931, the Board enlisted the cooperation of a number of distinguished geographers, historians, and lexicographers as an unofficial group that provided advice in writing until 1934.

Since 1943, advisory committees have been created to deal with Antarctic, Arabic and Persian, undersea feature, extra-terrestrial feature, and Micronesian names. The Antarctic and undersea committees are still active, bringing experience and expertise to bear on special problems. The others functioned as long as needed. The Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names (ACAN), when it was established in 1943 as the Special Committee on Antarctic Names (SCAN), faced the monumental problem of bringing order into the chaotic geographic nomenclature of a vast, inaccessible, inhospitable continent more expansive than the United States, most of it unseen by man at that time. The Hydrographic Office chart to accompany the Antarctic sailing directions was awaiting publication and needed names.

Antarctic names required extensive research. ACAN searched out and digested all available documents, and after much deliberation developed, tested, approved, and published naming rules applicable to this area. Other countries adopted these or similar rules. After the immediate needs of the Antarctic chart were met, ACAN and its staff continued its study of reports, books, maps, charts, photographs, log books, and flight records; plotted positions; traced and retraced routes; and corresponded and conferred with explorers and cartographers. The resulting answers to "who named what, when, for whom, why and where" provided the basis for acceptance of names or for choice among alternatives. By the beginning of the International Geophysical Year (1959), the nomenclature had been fixed well enough so that new names could be fitted in as exploration proceeded. In less than two decades, chaotic confusion with bitter controversy over names in the Antarctic was resolved into an orderly nomenclature largely agreed upon internationally. The physical fruits of ACAN's labor include names on maps and a series of gazetteers. The 1990 edition of the gazetteer of Antarctica contains some 16,000 names, of which 3,000 are variant names retained for historical reasons.

Systematic processing of names from the Arabic and Persian languages required not only screening out dialectical variations, but also supplying the short vowels that in Arabic are commonly not written and in names are not apparent from context. To fashion an example from English: One might readily make out "batter" from "bttr" in a story about baseball, but "Bggs" for the small town where the game was played could be "Baggs," "Beggs," "Biggs," "Boggs," or even "Buggs." Reconstruction of the whole name was accomplished by identifying the language of origin, etymologizing the words that present problems, and then converting to roman letters systematically. This is a difficult and complicated process, but the committee developed a high degree of skill in applying it. More than 100,000 names were processed from Arabic and Persian

and standardized in this manner. Scholars at the American University in Beirut and at the Istituto per L'Oriente in Rome were commissioned to assist in this work.

The Advisory Committee on Undersea Features (ACUF) has made excellent progress in its 26 years of operation. Exploration of the oceans and sea floors has been sharply stepped up in recent years. Mapping has kept pace in both coverage and detail. More and better equipped expeditions have gained new knowledge and new insight. Old features have taken on a new look and new kinds of features have been discovered. Names for these features and terms to describe them need to keep pace with discoveries. ACUF helps both to focus on information about past and present exploration and to develop names and terms for international agreement. It actively collaborates with a naming body of the International Hydrographic Organization, whose gazetteer of undersea names includes many approved by ACUF.

International Programs

For many years, the Board has been active in international cooperation and standardization. Early in the fifth period the density of names on existing maps of representative parts of the world was sampled at several scales. The results showed that the world's geographic names then in use were too numerous for any one person to ever look at in a lifetime, were too numerous for any one country to treat, and showed too many variations and inconsistencies in spelling and form. World acceptance of the idea of international name standardization through international cooperation and based on nationally standardized written forms has developed step by step. At the request of the United Nations in 1958, the Board designed an international program. A Group of Experts on Geographical Names, assembled in July 1960 at U.N. headquarters in New York, studied the program, laid out the kinds of problems that national standardization programs would encounter, and recommended international conferences to develop common understandings and explore avenues of cooperation. It recommended that a U.N. conference be held in Geneva in August 1967. Delegations attended from 55 countries and 10 international organizations. Successive conferences have followed at 5-year intervals in London, Athens, Geneva, and Montreal. Actions are taken by consensus or vote, but there is no way to enforce national compliance, and if differences remain, further effort is made to resolve them. Fourteen meetings of the Group of Experts have been held between or immediately before and after conferences. They function to implement U.N. resolutions. The last meeting, in 1989 in Geneva, was attended by 76 experts from 36 countries.

The United Nations is already a powerful force in international standardization but has not yet reached its full potential. Patience is called for in interlanguage communication. Ideas and proposals have to be comprehended, studied, discussed, and often reworked before a consensus develops. It is a slow process, but it has worked to produce agreements.

Proliferation of new countries has brought new complications. On becoming members of the United Nations, newly independent countries vary widely in their preparedness to contribute to international geographic name standardization. While the name for the new country and that for its capital rank high on the national agenda, what other countries do with names is of less concern. Countries having relatively small numbers of educated citizens have been given help in recognizing and dealing with their own name problems. New countries that are multilingual or have one or more languages still without a written form face a special challenge. Other countries have similar problems. China does not yet know how to romanize its non-Chinese language names; the Board itself is still wrestling with Native American Indian language scripts, but at least it has resources to deal with the problem. The United States has taken on an important role in developing other countries' competence in this field as well as in

mapping. Geographers and cartographers from a number of countries have worked in the Board's offices to become familiar with standardization procedures. Under the aegis of the Pan American Institute of Geography and History and the United Nations, the Board has been especially active in Latin America. Other countries have also held regional meetings and conducted training courses.

The Board has also cooperated with individual countries from the beginning. Cordial relations with the comparable agency in Canada have been the rule since that agency was created in 1897. Officers of the Board and its Canadian counterpart often participate in each other's meetings. Close cooperation with the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (PCGN) in Britain began with its establishment, in 1919, to deal with foreign names. Before the Board itself began to process foreign names in quantity it depended largely upon the PCGN. Cooperation became even closer in 1947 with the adoption of a joint system for romanizing Cyrillic names and now includes agreement on not only all the romanization systems, but also most phases of operations. Consultations are held at 2-year intervals. In naming features on ocean floors and in Antarctica, the Board coordinates with several countries, including Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom.

The Board has always used some conventional names, ones approved for use in addition to or in lieu of local official names, for example, Rome for Roma and Italy for Italia. Every country has its stock of such names, along with names for entities beyond national sovereignty, such as oceans. Many of these names have dropped out of use except in historical context, for example, Christiania for Oslo. Many others are now less well known than their official counterparts and are being winnowed out.

The Foreign Names Committee undertook a review of all BGN conventional names, eliminating many and publishing the rest in a special list. The United Nations took up the problem, coined the term *exonym* (to describe the use of, for example, Rome for Roma), and recommended that each country follow the Board's example. Many have done so.

Recording of names from unwritten languages by speakers of another language has been a fertile source of error, notably in the colonial period of the Americas and Africa. The U.N. has therefore encouraged the training of field personnel in areas where initial name collection has yet to be done.

Work of the Board on Domestic and Foreign Names

The Domestic Names Committee has met some 500 times since 1947 and in collaboration with the U.S. Geological Survey has compiled some 2.5 million names in the United States and its territories and possessions for the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) computerized file. As has been true from the beginning, local usage has been the principal basis for choice. The Board rarely initiates changes except in the case of names it considers derogatory or excessively duplicated.

In 1927, the Board urged each State to set up a State board or other authority if it did not already have one and to compile a State gazetteer. Rhode Island produced a gazetteer in 1932, intended as the first State volume in a national gazetteer. A few other States followed but did not publish. The current national gazetteer program is tied to the computerized GNIS file in the U.S. Geological Survey, which contains all names shown on its 1:24,000 topographic map series, including names such as those of churches and schools on which the BGN does not rule. The latest volume, South Dakota, contains 14,000 entries. Compilation of the State volumes is being done on

contract, principally by university students. There is a growing need to recognize and record Native American names.

More and more States now participate in the name standardization process, particularly in the critical area of determining local usage. Some States have boards; some designate State officers or societies. Names are routinely referred to them before final action, and one of the Domestic Names Committee's monthly meetings is held in conjunction with the annual Western States Geographic Names Conference.

The Board's Foreign Names Committee has met 285 times since 1947 and has developed a file of nearly 5 million names in all countries of the world. Following procedures approved by the committee and using native maps, charts, atlases, gazetteers, and other documents, the committee's staff of toponymists and linguists selects names for recommendation to the committee. In many cases, names thus "standardized" conform to local official names. But problems can result when official sources do not agree or when inconsistencies in spellings or locations are encountered. The staff then evaluates evidence and recommends names according to defined procedures. Romanization systems are applied to convert names appearing on sources from nonroman-alphabet countries.

As indicated above, the Board collaborates with other countries to ensure it has access to official-names information.

Foreign-names decisions are made available to users by publishing gazetteers periodically for each country, by issuing decision lists after each meeting, and by providing an inquiry service. Efforts are underway to build an automated file of names.

Conformity with the Board's rulings is now the norm, though not universal. Sometimes non-Government users committed to other names or forms cannot readily or quickly change. Some countries cooperating in mapping programs have at times wished to differ about names. On two occasions Board-approved names were changed at a high Government level—Puerto Rico to Porto Rico and Cape Canaveral to Cape Kennedy. Both remained in use for some years before the original names were restored as a result of public demand.

A Century of Achievements

In its first century, the work of the Board on Geographic Names has been characterized by successes and disappointments but attainments have far overshadowed setbacks. Included among its many accomplishments are:

- Development of a well-tested body of policies, some dating back to 1890.
- Establishment of files of millions of standard names, with supporting evidence for each.
- A standard name file for every part of the world, including extensive files of names converted into roman-letter forms from other scripts by systems developed and adopted jointly with one or more other countries.
- Publication of gazetteers for all countries, available to all users—an invaluable body of expertise in all aspects of geographical nomenclature.
- Answers to thousands of inquiries every year.

- A solid foundation for international cooperation and assured continuation of this upon which to build further.
- A beginning of an understanding of the processes by which geographic features get names, how such names become accepted, how understandable terms promote acceptance of programs and further the spread of information and knowledge, and how the standardizers of names can differ and still cooperate in a collegial manner.

In any process involving living things, including people, significant changes tend to come at increasingly shorter intervals. This has been true of geographical-name standardizing and presumably will continue to be. There have been frequent physical moves of personnel and records. In 1943, the Board's unit working on Japanese names was housed in Cleveland because people of Japanese extraction were not allowed in Washington, DC. The China Unit occupied space in the Library of Congress. A unit of Thai graduate students did its work in the Department of the Interior. The Board and its units since 1943 have had space in a dozen different buildings as their staffs, records, and equipment have waxed and waned with shifts in Government priorities. The computer now provides a means of recording and retrieving names in enormous numbers at great and ever increasing speed, accessible from any distance. It is also a tool for generalizing from an enormous body of facts. The very size of the corpus of information is approaching the point where only automation can handle the task.

New tools and new techniques themselves bring new capabilities and new needs. For instance, coding and sequencing for storage and retrieval take on new emphasis, and reconciling proliferating systems becomes more difficult by orders of magnitude. It often seems that the more problems the Board solves, or helps to solve, the more numerous and complex are the new problems. Digital storage of maps could perhaps be followed by digital storage of names. It will be increasingly difficult to recall how different things used to be, yet interesting to note how alike they have remained. Without being reminded, few would now note that the Board's present concern with Native American names takes us back full circle to 1890, when working with Native American names in Alaska was a factor in the establishment of the Board.

It is hoped that in 2090, people will look back at the United States Board on Geographic Names of 1890-1990 and say, "Everything considered, they made a good start!"

